

Tilburg University

Introduction

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Published in:
A Catholic minority church in a world of seekers

Publication date:
2015

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in Tilburg University Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Hellemans, S., & Jonkers, P. (2015). Introduction: The contingent meeting of a Catholic minority church with seekers. In *A Catholic minority church in a world of seekers* (pp. 1-18). (Christian Philosophical Studies ; Vol. 11). Council for Research in Values and Philosophy.

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INTRODUCTION

THE CONTINGENT MEETING OF A CATHOLIC MINORITY CHURCH WITH SEEKERS

STAF HELLEMANS and PETER JONKERS

It cannot be denied that the Catholic Church – like the other main churches in the West – has undergone deep and lasting changes since the 1960s. Two changes stand as paramount. First, the Catholic Church is transitioning from a majority church or a closed Catholic subculture to becoming, in many countries, a minority church, operating in a predominantly secular and competitive environment with a smaller committed following and with less institutional resources at its disposal. Second, the ways in which people relate to the Church are changing as well. Commitment is no longer self-evident or deferential. Once characterized as a flock led by their shepherds, those interested and active in the Church today exhibit a more critical and seeking attitude. These developments, as well as some other important trends regarding the role of the Catholic Church in society, will be examined in the first, empirical part of this book; in the second, philosophical and theological part, the consequences of the new situation for the Catholic Church and its theology will be studied. The present chapter, which serves as an introduction to this volume and builds on its contributions, is focused on characterizing the present-day relationship between the Church and seekers and on exploring, on a basic level, some new opportunities for a Catholic minority church to continue to appeal to larger sections of the population.

The analyses and prospects presented in this volume are, of course, heavily influenced by the situation of the Church and its societal context in the countries in which we, as contributors, are living and working, i.e. Belgium and the Netherlands, and, for one author, Germany and Austria. These European countries are regarded to be highly secularized, meaning that the main Christian churches have lost much of their former societal significance. We are aware that another territorial vantage point, e.g., Italy or the Philippines, might have given rise to different perspectives, e.g., a more self-assured view in which it is assumed that religion, in general, and the Catholic Church, in particular, will retain their central position in society. The experience of Northwestern Europe, however, is different. What is more, we are convinced that far-reaching secularization and pluralization, and the concomitant shift towards a more fragile minority position of the main churches in this part of the world will become, in due

course, the basic condition for most religions in other countries on the globe as well. Hence, we hope that the focus of this book on the highly secularized countries of Northwestern Europe will also be instructive to researchers working in other, at least for now, less secularized countries and continents.

THE 'POST-CHRISTIAN' CONDITION

From a Majority to a Minority Church

Let us first look at the new structural position of the Catholic Church in Northwestern Europe. Due to the processes of secularization and (religious) pluralization, the Church, since about 1960, is evolving towards a minority church. Three phases can be distinguished:

1. Leaving aside the debate about whether secularization started already in or even before the 19th century, one can state that until about 1960, the Catholic Church was in many countries – like in Belgium, Austria, Italy, or Spain – the majority church, sometimes even occupying a monopoly position. In the Protestant countries with sizeable Catholic minorities – like the Netherlands, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, or the United States – a cohesive Catholic subculture, a so-called 'fortress church' (elsewhere labeled as 'pillar', 'milieu' or 'Lager'), was built up after 1800. In both cases, the Catholic Church was leading in alliance with the elites of the country or subculture. The Church and (sub)society were regarded as more or less identical, an image cherished and idealized as 'natural' in Catholic circles.

2. After 1960, active involvement in the Catholic Church started to shrink rapidly, though most people were still influenced by Catholicism and regarded themselves, when asked in opinion polls, as Catholics. This development, resulting in a smaller core and a lot of people situating themselves between core Catholics and people without any religious affiliation, was captured by the Belgian sociologists, Jaak Billiet and Karel Dobbelaere, as a transition "from churchd Catholicism to social-cultural Christianity."¹ Grace Davie labeled this state of affairs as "vicarious religion": "religion performed by an active minority but on behalf of a much larger number, who (implicitly at least) not only understand, but, quite clearly, approve of what the minority is doing."² In

¹ Jaak Billiet and Karel Dobbelaere, *Godsdienst in Vlaanderen. Van kerks katholicisme naar sociaal-kulturele kristenheid?* (Leuven: Davidsfonds, 1976).

² Grace Davie, "Vicarious Religion: A Methodological Challenge," *Everyday Religion. Observing Modern Religious Lives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 22.

this situation, the Catholic Church, although no longer master of the situation, was still in the center of (sub)society.

3. In the third stage, active involvement is declining further, but now the in-between group is also shrinking. Voas shows, using the data of the European Social Survey of 2002-2003 in 22 European countries, that “fuzzy fidelity” – the in-betweens with some basic knowledge of and sympathy for Christianity – do not constitute a stable and self-sustaining category.³ The middle category begins to rise when secularization sets in; it reaches a high point when the religious and non-religious are about equal in size and declines when the non-religious overtake in quantity the religious part of the population. Thus, the final result is a small and declining inner core and a somewhat larger, but also numerically decreasing, outer shell. The main church or churches have then evolved towards the periphery of society. They have, in the words of Hervieu-Léger, become “excultured.”⁴

Taking the contribution of Loek Halman (see a.o. tables 2 and 4) as our guide in an attempt to interpret the situation of the main churches in Western countries on the basis of these three stages, we observe that the first two stages still apply to most countries. In a number of them, the main church still acts as the national church, with close links to the political, economic, and cultural elites of the country. In particular, some Orthodox countries in East and Southeast Europe (e.g., Greece, Georgia) are still in the first phase. In Malta and Poland, the Catholic Church is still occupying center stage. A large number of countries can be situated in the second stage. Secularization is visible, yet the main churches remain important. There is moderate active involvement, ties with important sections of the population, links with the political system: Southern Europe (Italy, Spain, Portugal) and Germany come to mind. A limited number of countries are in the third stage, showing far-reaching secularization and increasing marginalization of the main churches, without the rise of new churches or groups to fill up the void: e.g., the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, France, Belgium, Hungary, and the United Kingdom (without Northern Ireland). Remnants of the past are still present, e.g., church weddings and funerals of royals, or the turn to church rituals in times of national disasters. Yet, by and large, these countries are tending towards becoming ‘post-Christian’ in the near future.

Although Halman points out that Europe is far from secular – the majority of people in Europe and other Western countries say they believe

³ David Voas, “The Rise and Fall of Fuzzy Fidelity in Europe,” *European Sociological Review* 25, 2 (2009), pp. 161-167.

⁴ Danièle Hervieu-Léger, *Catholicisme, la fin d'un monde* (Paris: Bayard, 2003).

in God and adhere to a church – he also observes creeping and steady secularization in most countries. And, although it is to be expected that the religious differences between countries will persist, with main churches retaining a strong position in some countries, we nevertheless expect, as said, that the majority of countries will, sooner or later, end up in the third stage. This volume wants to reflect upon this new ‘post-Christian’ condition. What are the options for the former main churches, in particular the Catholic minority church, to gain a new attractiveness in post-Christian societies? What theology, which approach and organization, and which range of activities are appropriate to give presence to the Christian gospel in our time?

A final remark regards the title of this volume and this introduction. With the expression ‘a Catholic minority church’, as distinguished from ‘a minority Catholic Church’, we want to emphasize that, in our view, all churches will eventually become minorities in a predominantly secular society, with the result that there will no longer be majority churches at all. In contrast, in the recent past, and still in many countries today, majority churches were and still are the rule, whereas minority churches were/are in the margins of society.⁵ In England, for instance, the Church of England was, until about 1960, the majority church and the Catholic Church was, at the time, a minority, i.e., ‘a minority Catholic Church’. But in the current situation, in which *all* churches are becoming minorities, we prefer the expression ‘a Catholic minority church’ (or ‘a Protestant minority church’, etc.) to mark the difference with the non-churched majority.

The Many Stripes of Seekers and Seeking

Not only the position of the main churches has changed or is changing, but also the people who are engaging in or merely encountering church and religion. Put in the language of this volume, the erstwhile ‘sheep’ or followers have been turned into seekers. Individualization and (religious) pluralization are, as is well known, the major processes behind this turn. The label ‘seekers’ gained high currency from the 1980s onwards, especially in the United States. Research depicted people in search of spirituality, but without adhering to a church.⁶ In the United States, so-called seeker-sensitive churches were promoted in evangelical circles in order to reach the un- and non-churched.

⁵ See phase one and, to a certain extent, phase two in the above overview.

⁶ Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart. Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers. The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993).

The contributors to this volume have taken as their point of departure one of the four disjunctions that Charles Taylor has formulated in his position paper at the start of the larger project, “Faith in a Secular Age,” of which this book project is a part. He states: “There is a mode of spiritual seeking which is very widespread in the West today, but which the official church often seems to want to rebuff. Seekers ask questions, but the official church seems largely concerned with pushing certain already worked-out answers. It seems to have little capacity to listen.”⁷

Upon closer inspection, the concepts ‘seekers’ and ‘seeking’ can be – and actually are in this volume – used in more than one meaning. First, following Wuthnow in his *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s*, one can distinguish seekers from dwellers in a straightforward way.⁸ Seekers are then regarded as non-church members who are exploring, from outside, organized religion and in full awareness of their autonomy, what is on offer in the religious, spiritual, or life-orientating realm. They are construing their own religious blend out of a mix of different religions and life-orientations. Dwellers, on the other hand, are seen as believing and living religion within the confines of their churches. In his contribution, Loek Halman is using the dichotomy between seekers and dwellers in this sense. He concludes that seekers, defined as being religious without belonging, constitute across Europe a very small minority, about 7%, in contrast to the 60% of the Europeans who may be considered as dwellers, i.e., those who say they are religious and belong to a church. However, using another operationalization, i.e. being religious without regular church attendance, the proportion of seekers rises to 42% (table 4). According to this last criterion, Catholics across Europe are mostly dwellers, more so than Protestants and Orthodox people (figure 22). Yet, in the Netherlands, Catholic seekers outnumber Catholic dwellers (figure 23) – a finding confirmed in the surveys used by de Hart and Dekker – probably due to the low level of confidence of the Dutch Catholics in their church (figure 24). The dichotomy between inside dwellers and outside seekers can also inform theology. In this volume, Stephan van Erp is insisting on maintaining the difference between the two in order to avoid the trap of an all-too-easy accommodation – expressed in more traditional language – of the Church to the world. In his view, theologians should not desperately try to

⁷ George F. McLean, “Introduction. Disjunctions in the 21st Century,” *Church and People. Disjunctions in a Secular Age*, Christian Philosophical Studies, 1 (Washington: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2012), p. 5.

⁸ Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven. Spirituality in America since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

overcome the disjunction, but rather present foundational views to enable conversation and appealing practices with the outside seekers.

As Wuthnow himself already suggested, there is no absolute separation between seekers and dwellers. Many dwellers are seeking for spiritual enrichment, both within and outside their home church, no less than the seekers without affiliation to a church. Active church members are often avid internet surfers. They consult web pages of other churches almost as often as those of their home church.⁹ Hence, Joep de Hart and Paul Dekker are distinguishing in this volume, in addition to the category of non-affiliated seekers, two kinds of church members: seeking and non-seeking ones. They observe, firstly, that a large majority of Dutch believers agree that one ought to continue seeking deeper insights (table 3), and, furthermore, that a slight majority approves of the suggestion that one ought to assemble one's religion from different traditions (table 1). In other words, seeking in this broader sense has become normative for the majority of believers. Yet, in the real world, the practice of seeking, i.e., whether one is indeed gathering wisdom from different traditions, is far less widespread (table 2). It takes time, energy, and ability to practice seeking. De Hart and Dekker also show that seeking church members believe and practice not much less than their dwelling companions, the main difference being the stress of the former on inner experience (table 8 and 9). Affiliated seeking, so they conclude, should not be interpreted as a transitional phase on the way out of the church. On the contrary, it has become, in our advanced modern age, a permanent and substantial group of people inside the main churches. The case study by Kees de Groot and Jos Pieper on Christian spiritual centers in the Netherlands offers additional information on a particular group, namely, the very active religious seekers. The visitors of these centers qualify as both highly churchd – in terms of belief, practice, and volunteering – and intensely seeking spiritual enrichment, including, and without any reservation, 'alternative' religiosity (Eastern religion, New Age and esotericism, alternative psychology). They share some specific qualities. Although highly churchd, they are, at the same time, very critical towards and disappointed in the hierarchical church organization and its doctrinal stance. Moreover, they are exceptional in terms of age (with an average of 61 years), gender (76% female), and education (75% higher professional or university education). They are exceptional, too, in comparison with society at large: this group of people represents only a small segment of the total number of seekers and religious people alike, a segment that is, moreover, stagnating.

⁹ Elena Larsen, "CyberFaith : How Americans Pursue Religion Online" (http://www.pewinternet.org/files/old-media/Files/Reports/2001/PIP_CyberFaith_Report.pdf.pdf) (2 October 2014).

Finally, one can define ‘seeking’ in a general way as a characteristic feature of the “individualized individuals” (Luhmann) of our time. Indeed, individualization entails making choices all the time, living a life that is no longer comprehensively bound by an institution, but guided by the normative values of expressive individualism and authenticity.¹⁰ The last chapter of the first part of this volume and three chapters of the second part use the concept ‘seeking’ in this general sense: Staf Hellemans, when he writes about a new church that is willing to assist all people in their search for a fulfilling life; Peter Jonkers in his plea for a church that reevaluates its tradition of wisdom as a way to overcome the disjunction with society; Terrence Merrigan in his analysis of the inward turn as an opportunity for “the fragile recovery of transcendence in the midst of our secular age”; Rainer Bucher when he states that God is, in the end, the ultimate seeking agent, offering salvation to humans, and that the Church, in turn, can only be “a Church of seekers as People of God on a pilgrimage towards God.”

In sum, it is legitimate to use the label ‘seekers’ in diverging ways. Each rendering of the term highlights a specific aspect of seeking. Moreover, the multiple perspectives that the concepts ‘seekers’ and ‘seeking’ allow for, demonstrate how pervasive seeking has become in our time. Nevertheless, it is important not to identify the generic term ‘seekers’ with the small group of the active seekers, nor to idealize these highly active seekers as the stage setting vanguard. On the contrary, one has to keep in mind that the non-active seekers and the religious indifferent constitute, in the secularized countries, the overall majority of the population. Moreover, seeking, in most cases, does not imply deep and unsettling existential search. As Merrigan, presenting a metaphor from yet another book by Wuthnow, makes clear, seeking usually takes the form of religious tinkering – or bricolage – and of seeking practical solutions out of the different materials at hand. “Life may be a pastiche with which a person is content.”¹¹ All these different renderings of seeking, generic as well as specific, intense or apathetic, unsettling or practical, demonstrate the sea change in the way of life of those living in advanced modernity. It is a change which the Catholic Church cannot avoid addressing.

¹⁰ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 473-504.

¹¹ Robert Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers. How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 15.

The Inevitable Disjunction Between Minority Church and Society

There is ample empirical evidence of the existence of a deep disjunction between church and society. The secularization process continues through ups and downs – the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe and the religious resurgence in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s are examples of desecularization – and is now, particularly in Western and parts of Central Europe, attaining high levels. According to de Hart and Dekker, in 2012 only 30% of the Dutch population considered itself a member of one of the traditional churches (compared to over 75% in 1958). Participation in Sunday services has shrunk considerably to about 10%. Moreover, more than 50% of the Dutch population says that it gathers its beliefs and ways of life from what is available on the market of traditions and ideas, Christian as well as non-Christian, religious as well as secular. A staggering 96% think that in order to be religious one doesn't need a church. The main churches are weakening, resulting in a smaller presence and a decrease of their impact on society.

In a sense, the widening of the disjunction between (main) church and society in advanced modernity is inevitable.¹² It is the corollary result of the fact that the Church has become a minority. This, in turn, is a consequence of the fact that the main churches, and in particular the Catholic Church, have lost many of the functions (social, educational, political, cultural, scientific, artistic), which they used to perform before 1960. Other factors that have aggravated this disjunction are the competition with other churches and religions, and the spread of expressive individualism to all layers of society. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the Catholic Church was able to instruct and mobilize the rank and file to the highest degree ever possible. In those times, the conjunction between the Church hierarchy and its following, between the Church and (sub)society, reached a high point. Many analyses of the current position of the Catholic Church are still imbued by this past. Even today, these analyses are written in terms of loss, and the term 'resurgence' is often just another name for longing for the normative and idealized past of the 'fortress' in the first modernity. But returning to the 'great conjunctions' of the past, be it Roman, medieval, or modern, is not an option. We have to think about religion and the Catholic Church in new ways as a response to the challenges of our time, as a new stage in the Christian tradition, without mourning the past. However, there is no need to be too pessimistic in this respect. Although overall trust in the churches has been declining

¹² Staf Hellemans, "The *Magisterium*: Conjunctions and Disjunctions in Modernity. A historical-sociological analysis," *Towards Kenotic Vision of Authority in the Catholic Church* (Washington D.C.: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2014).

since the 1960s, and although they have lost their monopoly, when it comes to giving answers to moral and existential questions, the churches are still able to inspire large numbers of people. In comparison to other organizations such as political parties, trade unions, environmental organizations, and sports clubs, the 'market share' of the established churches in the religious field is still by far the largest. They continue to attract the lion's share of people interested in religious matters.

The Contingent Meeting of Two Sides

In view of all this, we think that it is no longer realistic to expect, as was still the case at the time of Vatican II, that the majority of the population will, almost spontaneously, return to the Catholic Church, even if it did find the right approach and carve out the right religious offer for contemporary society. For one thing, there is a great diversity of opinions regarding the concrete content of this 'right' approach and offer. Second, the idea that non-Catholics are, so to speak, Catholics-in-waiting, who are, in principle and almost instinctively, prepared to come over, has turned out to be invalid.

In fact, the question how a Catholic minority church can find a new appeal in a world of seekers involves two sides, namely, the Catholic Church and the seekers, each with their own perspectives and needs. Hence, the meeting between seekers and the Catholic Church will be the result of a two-way process. Moreover, a conjunction between these two sides is contingent and partial, and in need of constant renewal. As far as the side of the Church is concerned, the question is whether, how, and under which conditions it will be able to appeal (again) to a significant part of the population. Here, the focus is put on the options and reactions of the Catholic Church. In this volume, the Church's side of this two-way process has our primary attention. However, the question of a Catholic minority church also concerns the development of society and the addressees of the Church. Today's society consists of people whose religious attitude has, in many cases, moved even beyond Grace Davie's qualification of "believing without belonging." Whereas Davie's characterization still presupposes a certain familiarity with, or at least knowledge of, a religious tradition, contemporary people's religious attitudes often rather reflect a 'longing without belonging', which stresses the rather undefined and syncretistic character of their beliefs and (religious) practices. Because this longing is so indefinite, many people cannot help but see the objects of this longing as a social construction of reality, and as endlessly replaceable by other ones. This explains why they

sense a kind of homelessness and irony towards their own beliefs.¹³ One can argue on good philosophical and theological grounds, as Jonkers and Merrigan do, that such an attitude towards one's own life and convictions is, in the long run, not sustainable, either on an individual or on a societal level. Yet, it is an empirical fact that many people turn their back on the offer of the churches and religions. In other words, what remains to be seen is whether, how, and under which conditions active and less active seekers are construing their religion, Christian as well as non-Christian. Only then can it become apparent how (un)likely it is and will be for seekers to respond to the appeal of the Catholic Church.

CONJOINING A MINORITY CHURCH WITH SEEKERS

Given that in contemporary society the relations between the minority church and the seekers are predominantly characterized by disjunction, and that the prospects for conjoining them again are marked by a great degree of contingency, the idea of a wholesale conjunction of the two sides under firm church control has to be given up as completely unrealistic. In our times, such a scenario is only imaginable if the Church were to opt for a sectarian strategy. But even then, the Church would not have the power to stop many die-hard believers from switching churches at a later time or eventually leaving the Church altogether, nor would the Church be able to prevent the risk of schisms. However, less comprehensive efforts to forge new conjunctions obviously make sense. The last chapter of the first part of this volume and all chapters of the second part are exploring various suggestions for conjoining these two sides from the part of the Catholic Church. Most important here is that it is obvious that the 'one size fits all'-model has become obsolete, so that the Church not only has to upgrade its religious offer, but also has to include different types of people and different degrees of religious commitment.¹⁴ It also needs to reform its organizational structure and attitude in order to be able to reach out to seekers.¹⁵ Actually, the Church has always been good at adapting its institutional organization to changing contextual factors. Again, there is no reason to be overly pessimistic. Nevertheless, what the Church will have to give up is the kind of

¹³ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 73-78.

¹⁴ Peter Jonkers, "A Purifying Force For Reason. Pope Benedict on the Role of Christianity in Advanced Modernity," *Towards a New Catholic Church in Advanced Modernity. Transformations, Visions, Tensions* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2012), pp. 96-101.

¹⁵ Staf Hellemans, "Tracking the New Shape of the Catholic Church in the West," *Towards a New Catholic Church in Advanced Modernity*, pp. 28-32.

ultramontane mass Catholicism which used to dominate in the 19th and early 20th centuries.¹⁶ It will have to make room for a kenotic church, for a seeker-friendly church – without guarantees.¹⁷

In the final section of this introduction we want to situate the suggestions and strategies for a conjunction of the Catholic minority church with the seekers against a broader background. Again, we want to emphasize that the success of these suggestions and strategies for conjunction is anything but guaranteed, since all of them are fundamentally marked by the contingencies that characterize the relations between church and society. The observations of the previous section confront all churches with a fundamental dilemma: should they confine their pastoral care to the existing in-crowd, in other words, the dwellers inside these churches, thereby putting up with the fact that this group is dwindling and aging, or should they reach out to the seekers (inside and outside the churches), thereby taking the risk that the latter will only take scattered pieces of their narratives, teachings, and practices to heart. As the title of this book already suggests, we are convinced that the churches should take the latter option.

Theoretical Considerations Regarding the Conjunction Strategy

What are the sociological, philosophical, and theological considerations supporting the main thesis of all contributors to this volume, namely, that the Catholic Church should opt for a conjunction with seekers? When the question of how to conjoin church and society is raised, two contrasting strategies are often put forward: a conservative, sectarian one, and a liberal, merging one. From a sociological perspective, both strategies fall short of expectations. The conservative strategy puts its odds on a highly demanding religion and tight community building. However, this strategy to confine the conjunction of the Church with society to the in-crowd of strongly believing church members risks the Church ending up only with ‘the happy few’. The liberal strategy wants to renew, along the lines of *Gaudium et Spes*, the alliance between the Church and the modern world. But this strategy fails to see the abstractness and lack of relevance of its proposals in the current societal setting, which predominantly consists of people who are quite indifferent to religious issues, and who regard any ecclesiastical strategy to conjoin with the world very suspiciously. Moreover, if this strategy boiled down to an affirmation without reservations of the actual world, it will not convince people to reconnect to the Church, since it offers no answer to the pressing

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 21-23.

¹⁷ Wacław Hryniewicz, *The Spirit: The Cry of the World* (Washington D.C.: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2014), p. ix.

existential and moral questions that living in today's world precisely generates, just as it does not present a plausible, spiritual alternative to the actual world. In sum, the outlook for the Catholic Church for conjoining itself to the world in a successful way seems bleak: the conservatives have a workable strategy but only for a small number of highly committed people. The liberals have lofty ideas, but without being able to translate them into an effective church strategy. The work of elaborating a fitting offer for people to lead a fulfilled life in advanced modernity is huge. And there are lots of competitors.

Apart from the sociological arguments that prevent the question of how to conjoin the Church and the seekers to be answered unambiguously, there are also fundamental theological reasons for the thesis that faith and world always have been and always will be strange bedfellows. These reasons can be summarized by the word of the Gospel that Christians are indeed *in*, but not *of* the world.¹⁸ Against this background, the question of the conjunction of the Church and seekers turns into a paradox: how can the Church remain faithful to its true mission, which is fundamentally an unworldly, godly one, while it has, at the same time, the missionary vocation to open itself up to the world and to keep in touch with all people, especially with those who are seeking meaning and orientation in their lives? It is obvious that this paradox cannot be avoided, and can even less be solved, because it belongs to the essence of Christian faith.¹⁹

Against this complex background of the paradoxical relation between faith and the world, this volume discusses fundamental ideas as well as concrete strategies on how church and society can be conjoined in our time, and what these mean for the Church and for theology. An important common observation that is made by all contributors is that, at least in Western Europe and the United States, a new type of Catholicism is emerging, which can be defined as 'choice Catholicism'. Put more concretely, the Catholic minority church has only religious means to attract believers, and the ecclesiastical hierarchy can no longer promote its message as the leader of an encompassing Catholic world, consisting of an extended network of societal institutions, such as schools and universities, welfare work, cultural organizations, trade unions, etc. Furthermore, the large numbers of priests who belonged to the intellectual and social elite have been only partly replaced by lay movements of Catholics and 'new ecclesial movements'. This is leading to a dramatic change in the institutional set-up of the Church: in many Western

¹⁸ Peter Jonkers, "In the World, but not of the World. The Prospects of Christianity in the Modern World," *Bijdragen* 61 2000, pp. 370-389.

¹⁹ Benedict XVI, *Address of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI in Freiburg im Breisgau, Sunday, September 25, 2011* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2011).

European countries, parishes are in disarray due to the lack of priests, lay pastoral workers, and the aging of voluntary workers; but the new structures of the Church on a local level are still wrapped in mystery. It goes without saying that new local structures are imperative if the Church is to reach out to the seekers, inside as well as outside the Church.²⁰

As to the content of Catholic faith, it will only have something to say to seekers if it succeeds in presenting itself as a way of inward, spiritual life, which dwells from a divine source, an expression of traditional wisdom, capable of truthfully orientating the lives of humans, a community of people who stimulate each other to follow Christ's living example, and, of course, a message of hope for the many seekers of our times, especially outside the Church, encouraging them to put their lives in the sign of the risen Lord and to join the community of believers.²¹

Roads to a Theology of Conjunction

The option to reach out to the world of the seekers raises the question of what theological ideas could offer a theoretical underpinning of this approach. The contributors to the last part of this volume explore various roads leading to a 'theology of conjunction'. Jonkers starts with a philosophical analysis of the world of the seekers. Confronted with a plurality of lifestyles and their underpinning narratives, many people are persuaded that all of them are equally contingent so that their only option is to stick to the one they feel most familiar with. However, this attitude falls short of expectations because, just like any other human being, the seekers strive for a public recognition of their ways of life as authentic expressions of what it means to be human and, hence, as not completely contingent.²² He argues that Christian faith can offer a way out of this paradox by presenting itself as an expression of wisdom, thus offering seekers concrete examples of truthful life-orientations, but without overwhelming them with massive, fixed, and pre-given dogmatic answers.

Merrigan's contribution proposes to conjoin Christian faith with the world of seekers by developing, in dialogue with Taylor and Wuthnow, a Newmanian perspective on the religious subject. Newman focuses on the

²⁰ Staf Hellemans, "Tracking the New Shape of the Catholic Church in the West," pp. 24-28.

²¹ Peter Jonkers, "Religious Truth in a Globalising World," *Religion and Politics in the New Century: Contemporary Philosophical Perspectives* (Sydney University Press, 2009), pp. 197-203.

²² Peter Jonkers, "Contingent Religions, Contingent Truths?" *Religions Challenged by Contingency. Theological and Philosophical Perspectives to the Problem of Contingency* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), p. 176.

subject's inward turn and highlights, in particular, the crucial role of conscience. This approach resonates, according to Merrigan, remarkably well with the moral ideal of today's people, namely, to be true to oneself or to be authentic. For Merrigan, this inward turn in religion must be conceived of in terms of a spectrum between two poles, namely, individuated subjectivism, which emphasizes self-reliance, and relational subjectivism, in which encounters with others are regarded as crucial for the development of one's own subjective life. Following Newman and Taylor, Merrigan thinks it essential that relational subjectivism will prevail, but, at the same time, this is anything but certain because of the decline of communal religious life in a world that is dominated by individualized seekers. Against this background, he points to the topical relevance of Newman's turn to conscience as a way to rupture from within the self-enclosed space of contemporary culture, which is the pitfall in which today's seekers risk ending up. Merrigan suggests that through the experience of conscience, Christian faith is able to conjoin with the subjective turn of religion in our times, and, more specifically, to reach out to the seekers while, at the same time, offering them a viable alternative to the risk of being caught in the superficiality of an immanent frame.

Van Erp starts, as stated earlier, from the difference between inside dwellers and outside seekers and cautions against blurring the difference too quickly. However, a theological framework of God's divine promise for and presence in the world, for dwellers *and* for seekers, should be elaborated. In particular, Van Erp explores whether and how public life can be seen as a sacrament, in other words, as a 'locus theologicus'. Its ultimate goal is to show how this world itself is the space for the nearness of God's reign, i.e., emerging from God's sacramental presence. This approach is based on the fact that seekers and dwellers, people outside and inside the churches, have something in common insofar as they both participate in public life and share a common practice. This common ground deserves to be explored further within the framework of sacramental theology. It could offer secular culture a view of God's coming presence in public life: an ongoing relationship confirmed and maintained by a politics of trust, a sacramental performance that will not suggest it could make God's presence itself visible.

Finally, Bucher focuses on the need of the Catholic Church to embark on a new path and to take a new social shape. In our time, the old form – clerical, exclusivist, and excessively institutionalized – is in the process of deconstruction. Happily, 'a viable program' for a new Church has already been laid down in the Second Vatican Council. The central characteristic of this approach is kenosis, which means that the Catholic Church has to define itself as a church of the people. Such a kenotic church has to express its solidarity with humankind without reservation because

God offers his grace to all people. This principled stance to exclude nobody, to become, paradoxically, a minority church for all, is not only really new for the Church, but it is also risky because it is realized not in the institution nor in 'the end of history', but only in the singular event of the graceful encounter with God. This means that pastoral care and flexible arrangements get the pivotal role in the Church, to the detriment of maintaining the Church as an established organization.

Strategies for a Conjunction between the Church and the Seekers

On a more concrete level, the question arises as to what strategies the Catholic Church can devise in order to reach out to the world of seekers. First of all, it has to realize, as de Hart and Dekker point out, that reaching seekers outside the churches will be difficult because their basic attitude is that one doesn't need a church in the first place in order to be religious. Furthermore, they are – just as the most active affiliated seekers (see the contribution of de Groot and Pieper in this respect) – loath to the idea of faith as an all-in package, and prefer a personal approach with a lot of attention to the experiential dimension of faith and respect for their own interpretations of religious truths, which are tailored to their stage of life and lifestyle. At any rate, the Church needs to respond to the dominant societal trends of individualization and pluralization if it wants its offer to be accepted by the seekers inside and outside the Church. But, at the same time, the Church has to reach out to its core members and respond to their needs as well. Last but not least, it has to safeguard its identity, since recognizability is a crucial asset in our current multiple-choice society. These basic insights pose a huge challenge for the organizational structure of the Church: as a universal church it needs, at the same time, to think and to act locally, that is, to reach out to small communities and informal networks (including the exploding number of virtual ones). To use another paradox: in times of deinstitutionalization, the Church has to show its institutional relevance. It can only realize this if it is able to reinvent itself as an institution in a time of profound institutional instability.

On a theoretical level, Hellemans and Bucher discuss diverse strategies for growth in the mainline churches. What is most striking in this respect is that the Catholic Church does not seem to have any strategy at all, perhaps because it erroneously thinks that it still has a monopoly in the religious field, and that it can stick to its fixed structures. The first part of this volume makes abundantly clear that this is no longer the case: the Church has become willy-nilly one player among others in the competitive market of church growth and decline. Moreover, a power reversal is happening between the clergy to the lay seekers, which forces the Church into the position of suppliant: it can no longer enforce its doctrines and moral norms, but, instead, has to convince, to attract, to

appeal. Furthermore, by accommodating the rules of the market, the Church runs the risk of taking for granted the problematic character of these rules, and thus of losing its identity. Addressing the public in an appropriate way has become paramount, and an appealing leader is an enormous asset in this respect. What is even more important in these times of expressive individualism is that this leader shows authenticity, that he, as a person, is the incarnation of the message he stands for, as the example of Pope Francis has made abundantly clear. Although challenging, devising an effective growth strategy is not a mission impossible for the Church, especially because it can learn from other (secular and religious) large organizations and institutions, which are going through a similar process. All of them are experiencing the fundamental impact of individualization and pluralization on their internal structures. However, humans are fundamentally social beings, so there is no reason to believe that they will suddenly cease to be so. What has changed, and is still changing, are the ways in which people organize themselves, as well as the things they expect from the organizations they choose to belong to.

As regards its concrete response to individualization, the first thing that has to be noted is that the Church, because of the importance it has always attached to a communal religious life, strives to be an effective countermovement against the distress that is caused by an individualism that has gotten out of proportion. In principle, the Catholic Church welcomes everyone without reservation, and many people find this a blessing in times of social isolation. Furthermore, religious life, in spite of all the doom and gloom about the decreasing numbers of faithful, can still rely on a finely-woven network with a varied offer for individuals looking for spiritual enrichment and healing, local groups of church members who want to celebrate and deepen their faith, and outsiders who are interested in all kinds of religious matters. Even in these times of individualism, people are keen to share experiences of spiritual life with likeminded others, to gather food for thought on all kinds of moral and existential issues, to assemble around ideals and concrete initiatives regarding the good life, etc. As already noted above, the Church is still quite successful in this respect: it has proven itself capable of staging large national and even worldwide events, such as the mass audiences with the pope and his visits to foreign countries, mass pilgrimages to various sanctuaries, World Youth Days, etc. With respect to the Church's response to pluralization, it has to be noted that its offer has always been quite diverse and certainly not masterminded from one place (Rome) and by one person (the pope). It covers a wide range of activities, such as spiritual healing, reaching out to the poor and the needy, intellectual enrichment, political commitment, from low church to high church, from a local to a global level, etc.

Nevertheless, what the Church will have to give up is the kind of ultramontane mass Catholicism, which used to dominate religious life in the West. Similarly, the triumphalism, which characterized this period, will have to make room for a kenotic humility, which is critical of ecclesial egoisms, self-centeredness, and self-satisfaction. Phrased positively, a kenotic church is, first of all, friendly to people, that is, close to the poor, not only those who are in physical or material need, but also those who have lost hope in the meaningfulness of their lives. Furthermore, it is a church that is also open to dialogue with those who do not believe. In sum, it is a seeker-friendly church.

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